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Taking a closer look at rehabilitation

I VAGUELY remember that I once likened journalist John Sexton to Baloo, the bear from Disney's adaptation of The Jungle Book. I can't remember the context of my comparison but it still strikes me as a good one – the gentle giant of the press room.

I meant it kindly and he took it in the spirit that was intended. However, he didn't take quite so kindly to my comments about racehorse retraining charities in last month's Klarion and to be fair, he had a point.

John is now chairman of the recently renamed British Thoroughbred Retraining Centre (formerly the Thoroughbred Rehabilitation Centre) and he wasn't too happy about me taking another swipe at them when I had 'repeatedly failed to take up the long-standing invitation to visit the Centre' and he went on to say, 'if you are going to remain so hostile to centres like ours, in the interests of fairness, you should at the very least make the effort to come and see for yourself the work that is being done here'. Touché!

What could I do? I had to visit and so, a couple of weeks later, I set out on the very pleasant 50-mile drive through the picturesque Yorkshire Dales into 'enemy' territory, Lancashire.

I was determined to be blunt in my criticism. I took my iPad and it was my intention to look up the racing history of the inmates, establish when they had finished racing and who last owned them, and question how and why they had become charity cases. I couldn't imagine that many, if any, really needed to be there.

I was to meet John there along with

theirs.

I was glad I went. They were also prepared and they parried my first blow by telling me that they agreed with much that I had said about the centres and even that many of the things I felt about their centre had been 'all too true', in the past. I think they knew that it would be impossible to convince me that these centres should ever have been opened or that the racing industry should have supported them and instead they concentrated on showing me what they have done, in a very short time,

to improve the image and role of the British Thoroughbred Retraining Centre.

I know that, in the past, there were long-term residents in the Thoroughbred

Rehabilitation Centre that had gone straight from racing to live there with no real intention of finding them a second career. To my mind, the only purpose those horses served was to fill the centre's boxes and keep the operators in a job.

Gillian Carlisle, however, has set herself a target to turn a horse coming

straight out of racing around, and get it into a new job, in under three months. She admits that those coming in after already having had one or more owners after retirement from the track are 'trickier'. For them she sets her target at six months and says that anything beyond that 'has to be justified'. Of the 36 horses currently in residence, the longest that any has been there is eight months. This is still a long time for 'retraining' when you consider that Yogi Breisner says he can turn a horse from racing to hacking, with an appropriate rider, in 48 hours, but I am certain that it is a vast improvement on the way the centre operated in the past.

Ignorance

Gillian confirmed my belief that true welfare cases are very rare indeed in thoroughbred horses in Britain with, at most, one or two needing 'rescuing' each year. And she agreed that welfare issues in British horses, never mind British thoroughbreds, are invariably a result of ignorance or lack of money. Hence, she sees a large part of her centre's future to be in education and she is intent on developing that role.

One thing that still particularly

concerns me about the centre is the presence of perfectly healthy, sound, horses which still belong to people who have significant numbers of horses in training. The owners of these horses have decided that they want to retain ownership and/or control of their horses after racing and so have sent them to the BTRC rather than sell them. John and Gillian assured me that those owners pay for their horses' keep and that they are not charity cases, but we did not get into the specific financial details.

I BELIEVE that, if you own a horse, or a dog, or a cat, or any other animal, you are solely responsible for its welfare until such times as you pass ownership and responsibility onto someone else.

Of course, I have sympathy for those that fall on hard times and can no longer afford to properly care for their animal. It is perfectly understandable and acceptable that they should put their own welfare and that of their family ahead of that of their animal/s and, in those circumstances, they may well have to turn to charities such as the PDSA (People's Dispensary For Sick Animals) or, if it is a horse, equine charities such as the BTRC.

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his chief executive, Gillian Carlisle, who joined the centre last June from the Hong Kong Jockey Club's Beas River equestrian complex. I was well prepared to accept that they would both have the very best of intentions but I had no doubt whatsoever that it would be impossible for them to convince me that there is a need for centres like

THE Thoroughbred Rehabilitation Centre was founded in 1991 by Carrie Humble and was granted charitable status two years later. It claimed to be 'the UK's first charity dedicated to ex-racehorse welfare, retraining, rehoming and protection for life'.

I objected to it from its inception and I feel to this day that the formation of the Thoroughbred Rehabilitation Centre and the Jockey Club's knee-jerk reaction to it started a process which branded ex-racehorses as the worthless delinquents of the equine world, discarded by those who use them for sport, and in need of charity. As a result, ex-racehorses for use in other equestrian sports have been devalued and we have come close to creating a welfare issue where none previously existed.

Organisations like RoR (Retraining of Racehorses) have

counteracted some of the damage but they are not the answer. Thoroughbred horses are, in fact, the athletes of the equine world and they should be marketed as such for their use in other sports.

Retraining

When they have raced, they don't particularly require 'retraining'. They simply require the same training, for whatever discipline they are intended for, as any other horse. 'Retraining' is an infinitely better word than 'rehabilitation' but it still saddles (excuse the pun) ex-racehorses with a hint of the wrong image.

Next month I'll tell you what I would do to change the image of ex-racehorses and eradicate the problems that have been

caused by those who sought to turn racehorses into charity cases.

Carrie Humble was awarded an MBE in 2003 for 'her contribution to racehorse welfare'. She now operates as an 'Equine Welfare Consultant' and she offers advice on 'welfare conditions, training and behavioural issues, yard and land management, physical and temperamental assessment of horses', and, of course, 'fund-raising'. Her experience appears to have come from being a 'rider since childhood' and founding and running the Thoroughbred Rehabilitation Centre.

Before establishing the TRC Carrie ran a successful

antique import and design businesses in New York, as well as having a career in Theatre Design in London and Los Angeles, for which she qualified with a BA from Wimbledon College of Art in 1972.

I wonder what it was she saw in the racehorse which made it particularly suitable for her help – rather than, for example, laminitic Shetland ponies or coloured Cobs tethered on grass verges.

Carrie Humble left the TRC six years ago and no longer has any involvement with it. Gillian Carlisle became chief executive in June 2015, and John Sexton took over the chairmanship two months later. The centre was renamed in January 2016 and so began a new chapter.

BREEZE-UPS

I will be attending the following breeze-up sales in the coming weeks:

Tattersalls Ireland Ascot Breeze-Up Sale

April 6

Tattersalls Craven Breeze-Up Sale

April 12 - 13

Doncaster 2yo Breeze-Up Sale

April 19 - 20

Tattersalls Guineas Breeze-Up

April 28 - 29

Arqana Deauville Breeze-Up

May 14

Goresbridge Flat Breeze-Up Sale

May 19